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WHY DID THE DEFENSE OF QUANG TRI  
PROVINCE, SVN, COLLAPSE

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23 October 1972

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# STUDENT ESSAY

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## WHY DID THE DEFENSE OF QUANG TRI PROVINCE, SVN COLLAPSE?

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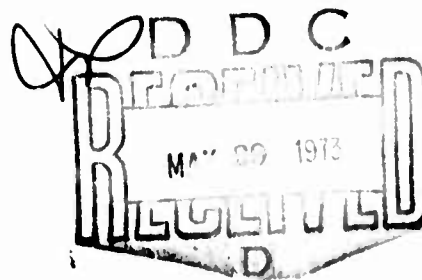
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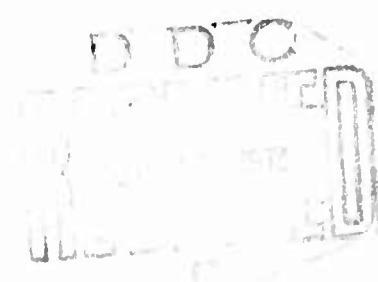
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(Essay)

WHY DID THE DEFENSE  
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COLLAPSE?

by

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US Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania  
23 October 1972



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# NORTH VIETNAM



## SUMMARY

The purpose of this essay is to describe the events of the North Vietnamese offensive against the 3rd ARVN Division in Quang Tri Province during the period of 30 March to 1 May 1972.

The essay begins with a discussion of the intelligence information that led up to the beginning of the offensive and the conclusions that could be drawn from the analysis. It will outline the circumstances of the daily execution of action and orders that led up to the withdrawal of the 3rd ARVN Division and its attached units from Quang Tri Province.

The conclusion of the essay deals with the inherent problems of the withdrawal as they pertained to command and control, leadership, and the attitude of the individual ARVN soldier.

## WHY DID THE DEFENSE OF QUANG TRI PROVINCE, SVN, COLLAPSE?

### BACKGROUND

On 30 March 1972, enemy forces began the current offensive with heavy and continued attacks by fire directed against the dispersed and relatively isolated firebases and strongpoints of the 3rd Army of Vietnam (ARVN) Division located just south of the DMZ and along the central Quang Tri crescent. These attacks by fire included extremely accurate and effective artillery fire from 130mm guns, as well as rocket and mortar fire, and they were launched from well-scattered positions by multiple artillery regiments which had performed extensive reconnaissance of all targets. The indirect fire attacks were combined and coordinated with repeated assaults by ground forces eventually numbering well in excess of two divisions of infantry and two regiments of armor, with the participation of a number of sapper units. These combined assaults by numerically superior forces over a period of 32 days forced the 3rd ARVN Division almost daily to reconsolidate its units in new defensive positions, and eventually succeeded in forcing the total withdrawal of the 3rd Division from Quang Tri Combat Base (QTCB) and, finally, Quang Tri Province.

I will attempt to include a chronological listing of the events of those 32 days in order that a proper focus can be obtained as to why the defense of Quang Tri eventually collapsed and relate the actions and orders which contributed.

First, a summary of the pertinent intelligence available prior to the initiation of the offensive and it will include a discussion of the deficiencies in the overall intelligence effort which appear

in retrospect.

It is not my contention that insufficient intelligence was available prior to the offensive, but I do hold that examination of all the available information would not necessarily have led an analyst to the conclusion that an offensive of this nature and extent was imminent. I contend that among all the items of intelligence produced prior to the attack, a small fraction indicated that such an offensive might occur, but other equally sizable and equally believable fractions indicated that something less might occur. In the course of my discussion, though, I will point out one important aspect of analysis which, at the time, may have helped to obscure the information which ultimately proved to be the most accurate.

Prior to the initiation of this offensive, the general configuration and disposition of enemy forces in the immediate vicinity of the 3rd Division's area of operations (AO) were fairly well-known. These were the forces which had traditionally operated within or on the fringes of the territory which eventually was assigned to the 3rd Division, and information concerning these forces had been developed over several years by various Free World Military Armed Forces (FWMAF) units.

The current offensive constituted nothing less than a full-scale invasion with maximum participation from all enemy units known to be in the immediate area and from other units which had not normally operated in the Quang Tri area in the past. In the spectrum of alternative courses available to the enemy, this course of action was the maximum, and in this geographic area it was totally unprecedented. No official or unofficial forecast, ARVN or American, of enemy dry season activity which was available to me prior to the



initiation of the offensive foresaw an attack of this magnitude at this time. Enemy capabilities were well documented, of course, and it was known that a full-scale, coordinated attack by infantry, armor, and artillery was a possible enemy course of action, but every intelligence estimate I saw, or heard, settled upon as most likely a course of action involving more limited attacks at a later date. The sources available to me were the G2's of the 1st and 3rd ARVN Divisions, and the American estimates produced by XXIV Corps, and they were in general agreement that the enemy would repeat the dry season activities of previous years, making use of attacks by fire and ground attacks against the ARVN DMZ firebases, and, in the Quang Tri lowlands, continuing their economy of force activities on all fronts to harass ARVN and Government of Vietnam (GVN) Regional and Popular Forces (RF/PF) and disrupt the GVN pacification machinery. It was anticipated that the 3rd Division would be singled out for some unspecified special attention, largely because it was a relatively new and untested combat unit. All authorities also pointed to the possibility of a large, but undefined, enemy offensive sometime in the summer, perhaps to influence the US presidential election campaign and to lend impetus to enemy proposals at the Paris Peace Talks. It was not anticipated, however, by any source available to me prior to March 30, that the enemy general offensive would occur so early and would take the form, in Quang Tri, of a multi-division invasion across the DMZ and from western areas of the Province. Again, I am speaking of estimates as to most likely courses of action, not the broad spectrum of enemy capabilities. Assessments of enemy capabilities were accurate; estimates of most likely courses

of action were not.

The difficulty at the time, however, was that in all categories of information there was no preponderance of believable and persuasive items supporting the invasion alternative, or any other alternative, and an objective evaluation of the available information did not inexorably lead to one conclusion in lieu of all the others. The "maximum effort/invasion" items amounted to a comparatively small fraction of the available information. And in all cases, the timing of any enemy dry season campaign was never specified clearly enough or consistently enough to permit reasonable conclusions as to time of initiation. There is one recurring element of analysis, however, which I feel may have served to steer conclusions away from the "maximum effort/invasion" alternative. Every estimate relied to some degree on the enemy's past activity patterns to predict his future courses of action. Thus, analysts could, and did, forecast tests of the DMZ firebases and harassment activity in the lowlands beginning in May or June, using as a basis the experience of previous years when the enemy had engaged in those activities in that time frame. The study of past activity patterns to forecast the future may be a valuable tool of analysis when the enemy has proven himself year after year to be a creature of unaltering habit, but excessive reliance on those past patterns can cloud the observer's vision and obscure changes in circumstances that can produce changes in enemy actions. Such reliance in this case may have led informed persons in the intelligence community to give less credence than was warranted to indications that the enemy considered 1972 to be a year of new, unprecedented opportunity and a time for new, massive, and

highly dedicated activity to end the war. It is true, however, as I noted above, that even an "enlightened" appraisal of the available information might have rejected the "maximum effort/invasion" fraction. It was a question upon which reasonable men might reach different conclusions.

#### EXECUTION

In order to give a validity to some of the conclusion remarks, I feel it important to briefly describe the action and orders during the operation (30 March - 1 May 1972). The 3rd ARVN Division Headquarters was the command and control element throughout the period.

##### Task Organization (Initial)

2nd Regiment (1st Bn, 2nd Bn, 3rd Bn, 1st Troop, 11th Cav Sqdn)

56th Regiment (1st Bn, 2nd Bn, 3rd Bn)

57th Regiment (1st Bn, 2nd Bn, 3rd Bn, 3rd Troop, 11th Cav Sqdn)  
11th Cav Sqdn (-)

147th VN Marine Corps Bde (4th Bn, 7th Bn, 8th Bn)

258th VNMC Bde (1st Bn, 3rd Bn, 6th Bn)

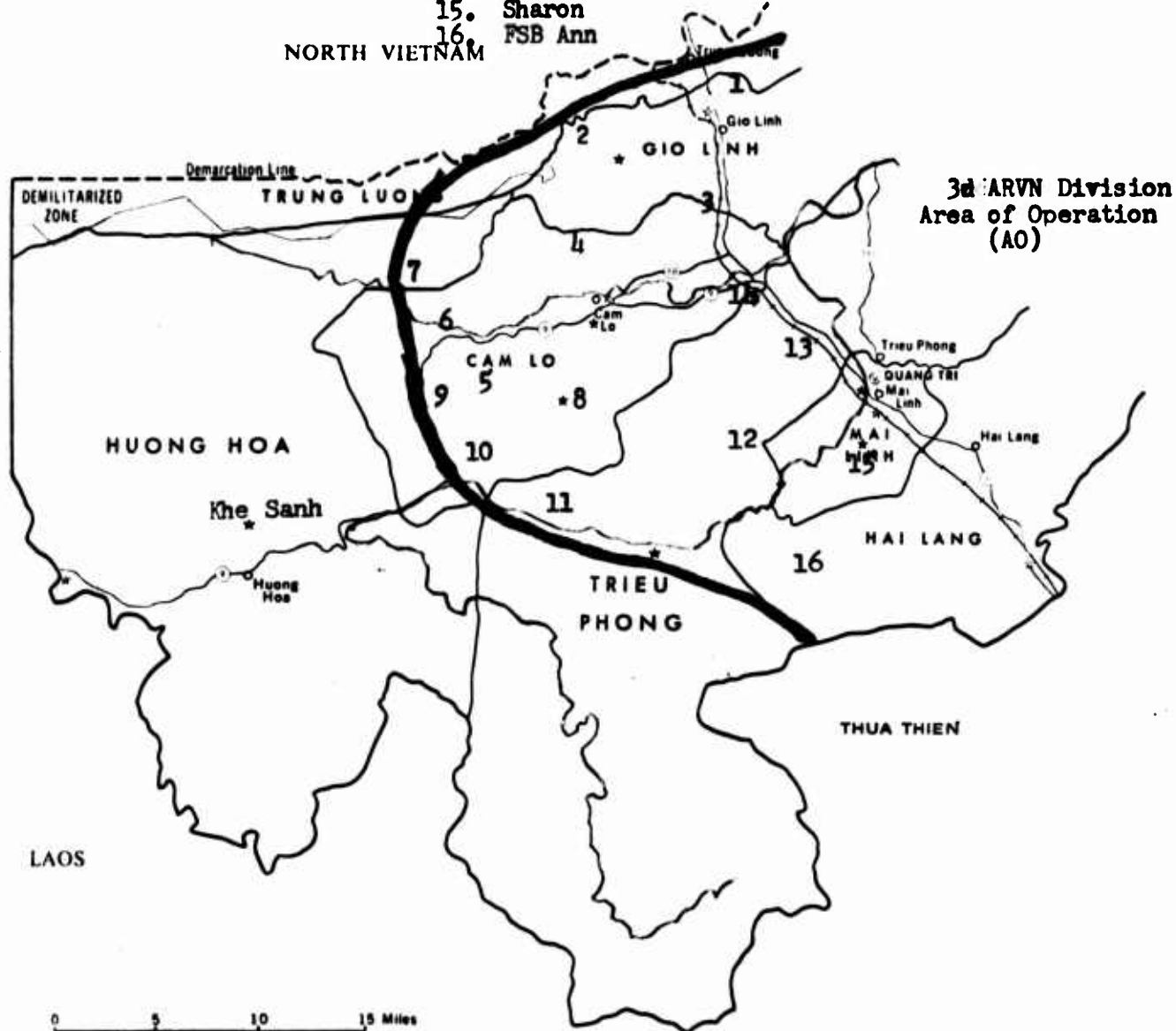
On 30 March, 1972, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) elements consisting of the equivalent of 3 regular divisions, two tank regiments, and five artillery regiments attacked the 3rd ARVN Division from the north across the DMZ and from the west through Khe Sanh. The attack began at 1200H with coordinated ground and artillery attacks against firebases along the perimeter of the 3rd Division AO (see Map A, page 6). Intensive artillery preparations were fired at Camp Carroll, Mai Loc, Sarge, Holcomb, A4, A2, C1, C2, and Dong Ha Combat Base (DHCB). Ground attacks were directed against the 56th Regiment in the vicin-

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# MAP "A" QUANG TRI

1. A2
2. A4
3. C1
4. C2
5. Camp Carroll
6. Khe Gio
7. FSB Muller
8. Mai Loc
9. Nui Ba Ho
10. FSB Sarge
11. Holcomb
12. FSB Pedro
13. Quang Tri Combat Base (QTCB)
14. Dong Ha Combat Base (DHCB)
15. Sharon
16. FSB Ann

NORTH VIETNAM



ity of Fire Support Base (FSB) Fuller and against the 147th VNMC Bde at Nui Ba Ho, Sarge, and Holcomb. Two companies of the 8th VNMC Bn operating near Holcomb were ordered to return to Mai Loc. The artillery attacks continued sporadically through the night. The intensity of the attacks increased at dawn on 31 March and again the rounds were directed at firebases along the perimeter of the 3rd ARVN Division AO. Also, Cam Lo, DHCB, and QTCB received heavy incoming. Battalion-size enemy forces were reported in the northwestern portion of the AO near Cam Lo. Three units of the 57th Regiment were engaged in heavy contact with attacking forces in the northeastern portion of the AO near A2 and C1. The 4th VNMC Bn at Nui Ba Ho and Sarge received an intensive artillery preparation followed by repeated ground attacks. Friendly units were forced to evacuate Nui Ba Ho at 2150H 31 March and Sarge was overrun by enemy forces at 0320H 1 Apr. The units, along with their US Marine Advisors, began to move back to Mai Loc. Enemy pressure forced elements of the 56th Regiment near FSB Fuller and 1st Bn, 2nd Regiment near Khe Gio to withdraw south of the Cam Lo River. 2nd Bn, 2nd Regt withdrew from A4 after receiving intense incoming and ground attacks. A decisive factor in the NVA's success was the unfavorable weather which severely limited TAC Air support, especially at Sarge and Nui Ba Ho. The NVA fired artillery sporadically throughout the night of 31 March. The intensity increased after 0600H 1 Apr. Once again, all units and installations throughout the Division AO received ground attacks. Elements of the 57th Regiment were attacked by the enemy near C1 and A2. The battalion at A2 was forced to withdraw to C1 at 1400H 1 Apr due to enemy artil-

lery and ground attacks. The elements of the 57th Regt at C1 had to withdraw at 2115H 1 Apr due to the enemy pressure and the threat of being flanked on both sides. Inasmuch as the artillery prime movers were not able to proceed to C1 and A2, it was reported that these howitzers (six 105's and six 155's) were destroyed in place. Elements of the 56th Regt were under attack near Khe Gio and Camp Carroll. The 1st VNMC Bn was attacked by an estimated enemy company at FSB Pedro. After receiving intense artillery fire, the 2nd Regt withdrew from C2 to Cam Lo at 1800H 1 Apr. Due to the intense rocket and artillery fire received at QTCB, the 3rd ARVN Division Headquarters was relocated to the Citadel in Quang Tri City. An order was issued by the Commanding General, 3rd ARVN Division, effective 011800H Apr, which provided for the tactical withdrawal of all friendly forces north of the Dong Ha River. The 57th Regt was ordered to withdraw south of the Dong Ha River and employ one battalion at Dong Ha, one battalion north of the river to provide security for the withdrawal and one battalion became OPCON to the 258th VNMC Bde. The 3rd Trp, 11th Cav Sqdn, was released from OPCON by the 57th Regt and ordered back to Camp Carroll. The 57th Regt was also given the mission of destroying the Dong Ha Bridge, on order. An engineer team was attached to the 57th Regt for this purpose. The 2nd Regt was ordered to withdraw south of the Dong Ha River and establish a defensive line at Cam Lo. The 2nd Regt was also to destroy the Cam Lo Bridge on order, using an attached team of engineers. The 147th VNMC Bde was to maintain its positions near Mai Loc. The 56th Regt was reinforced with the 11th Cav Sqdn and ordered to maintain its position at Camp Carroll. The 3rd VNMC Bn attached to the 20th Tank

Sqdn (attached to the 3rd ARVN Division on 1 Apr) was assigned the mission of occupying the high ground along the road between Cam Lo and Mai Loc. The 1st VNMC Bn and one battalion of the 57th Regt was given the mission of securing QTCB, and the 6th VNMC Bn was ordered to continue operations near FSB Pedro.

Task Organisation (2 April 72) (See Map B, page 10)

1st Armor Bde (A tactical HQ which arrived on 1 Apr 72 -  
20th Tank Sqdn, 1st Trp, 17th Cav Sqdn,  
57th Regiment, and the 3rd VNMC Bn)

147th VNMC Bde

258th VNMC Bde (-)

2nd Regiment

56th Regiment (ceased to be an effective unit on 2 Apr)

17th Cav Sqdn (-) (arrived on 2 Apr)

1st Ranger Group (arrived 4 Apr with 21st, 37th, & 77th Bns)

5th Ranger Group (arrived 6 Apr with 30th, 33rd, & 38th Bns)

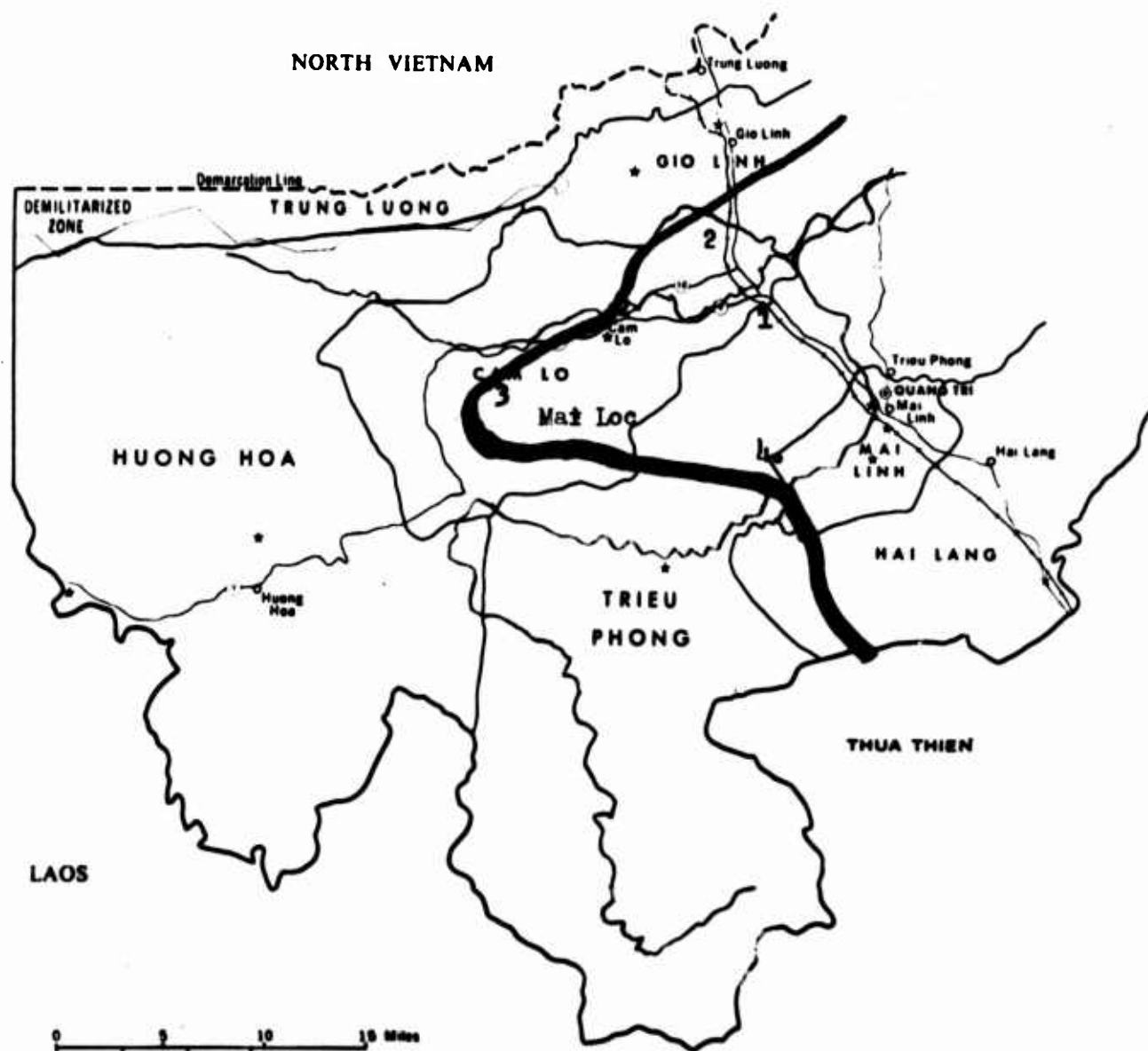
The initial attack by enemy tanks against friendly positions occurred on 2 April. The 3rd VNMC Bn located in the vicinity of DHCB reported tanks at 0915H. Initially these tanks were not engaged because they could not be immediately confirmed as enemy tanks. At 0950H clearance was given to fire on the tanks and they were engaged by US Naval gunfire. The 57th Regt reported tanks vicinity C1 along highway (QL) 1 and they were engaged by Naval gunfire. At 1030H the lead tanks had advanced to C1 and were engaged by the 2nd Bn, 57th Regt, which reported enemy ground troops on both flanks. At 1055H, the commander of the 20th Tank Sqdn relayed through advisor channels a message requesting permission to engage the enemy tanks. Permission was granted at 1100H. By 1200H the enemy tanks, had advanced to the Dong Ha Bridge and enemy infantry was reported to be in Dong Ha City.



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# MAP "B" QUANG TRI

1. Dong Ha Combat Base (DHCB) & Dong Ha City
2. FSB C1
3. FSB Fuller
4. FSB Pedro





At 1225H, tanks of the 20th Tank Sqdn engaged the enemy tanks which were approaching the Dong Ha River from the north about mid-way between C1 and C2. It was at this time that the 57th Regt suddenly withdrew in a very disorderly manner. At 1245H the 3rd VNMC Bn advisor reported that his Bn and the 20th Tank Sqdn had formed a small task force and were attempting to hold the south side of the Dong Ha Bridge. It was at this point that the Commanding General of the 3rd ARVN Division (Brig Gen Vu Van Giai) moved north from Quang Tri City along QL1 and physically stopped the mass exodus of fleeing troops of the 57th Regt and ordered their commander to regroup his forces and return to the OPCON of the 1st Arm Bde. Refugees streaming south added to the confusion and 3rd VNMC Bn advisor reported that large numbers of friendly soldiers from other units were abandoning their equipment and weapons and moving southward with the refugees. At 1330H, friendly tanks tried to knock out the struts of the Dong Ha Bridge rather than the main span because of the refugees on the bridge. A short time later, largely through the initiative of the 20th Tank Sqdn advisor, one section of the bridge was blown; however, the bridge was still passable. Engineers were then sent to the bridge with demolitions and at 1630H, the bridge was completely destroyed.

The weather precluded the effective use of TAC Air throughout most of the day. By mid-afternoon the weather cleared somewhat and an unknown number of airstrikes were conducted. The 3rd VNMC Bn advisor reported that six enemy tanks were burning north of the Dong Ha River as a result of the air strikes. Airstrikes were also directed against 20 enemy tanks and infantry north of the Cam Lo Bridge.

At 2115H, a 20 nautical mile no-fire zone was imposed around a point 700 meters northwest of the Cam Lo Bridge by the 7th Air Force because of two downed pilots. At 2150H the 3rd VNMC Bn reported 20 enemy tanks and a large number of ground troops north of the blown Dong Ha Bridge. Clearance to fire on these targets was obtained from the 7th Air Force at 2220H. The enemy tanks were also engaged by the 20th Tank Sqdn and US Naval gunfire. The 3rd VNMC Bn repulsed the enemy ground forces.

At 0900H on 2 April, the Senior Advisor of the 56th Regiment reported that Camp Carroll had been surrounded and that three ground attacks had been repulsed. However, at 1520H, the 56th Regiment reported that their commander was surrendering and it was only through the very courageous efforts of a CH 47 (Hook) pilot were we able to extract the US advisory personnel. The surrender of Camp Carroll meant the loss of a battery of 175mm guns, a 155mm howitzer battery and two batteries of 105's, plus numerous quad-50's and twin-forty's. This action resulted in the loss of the 56th Regiment.

The 7th VNMC Bn, along with two companies of the 8th VNMC Bn provided the defense of Mai Loc. This unit was in contact with enemy forces throughout the daylight hours of 2 Apr. The 4th VNMC Bn and two companies of the 8th VNMC Bn continued to move toward Mai Loc, arriving there at mid-afternoon. Artillery ammunition was at a critical level. An emergency re-supply by CH 47 was conducted; but due to the fact that no communication could be established between the helicopter crew and US advisors, the ammunition was dropped on the pad outside the fire base and was not obtained. The last of the 105mm ammunition was expended at approximately 1700H and only 50 rounds of 155mm ammunition remained.

When Camp Carroll fell to the enemy, the 147th VNM Bde commander decided that Mai Loc could not be held and at approximately 1800H the Bde began to evacuate back to the QTCB.

So within a period of two and a half days the perimeter of the 3rd ARVN Division went from essentially that shown on Map A to that shown on Map G.

Action within the division sector was relatively light between the 3rd of April and the 8th of April. Minor contacts were noted but the area of operations remained essentially the same.

Task Organization (8 April 72) (See Map C, page 14)

1st Armor Bde (20th Tank Sqdn (-), 57th Regt, 11th Cav Sqdn,  
5th Ranger Group)

258th VNM Bde (1st VNM Bn, 3rd VNM Bn, 6th VNM Bn, 17th Cav  
Sqdn, 2nd Troop, 20th Tank Sqdn)

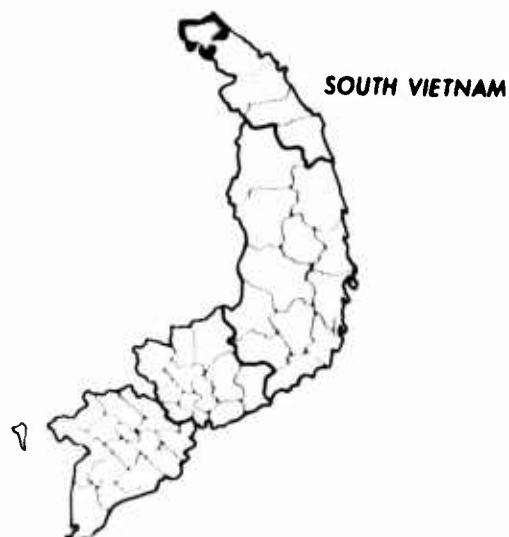
2nd Regiment

1st Ranger Group

\* On 4 April the 147th VNM Bde departed for Hue in Thua Thien

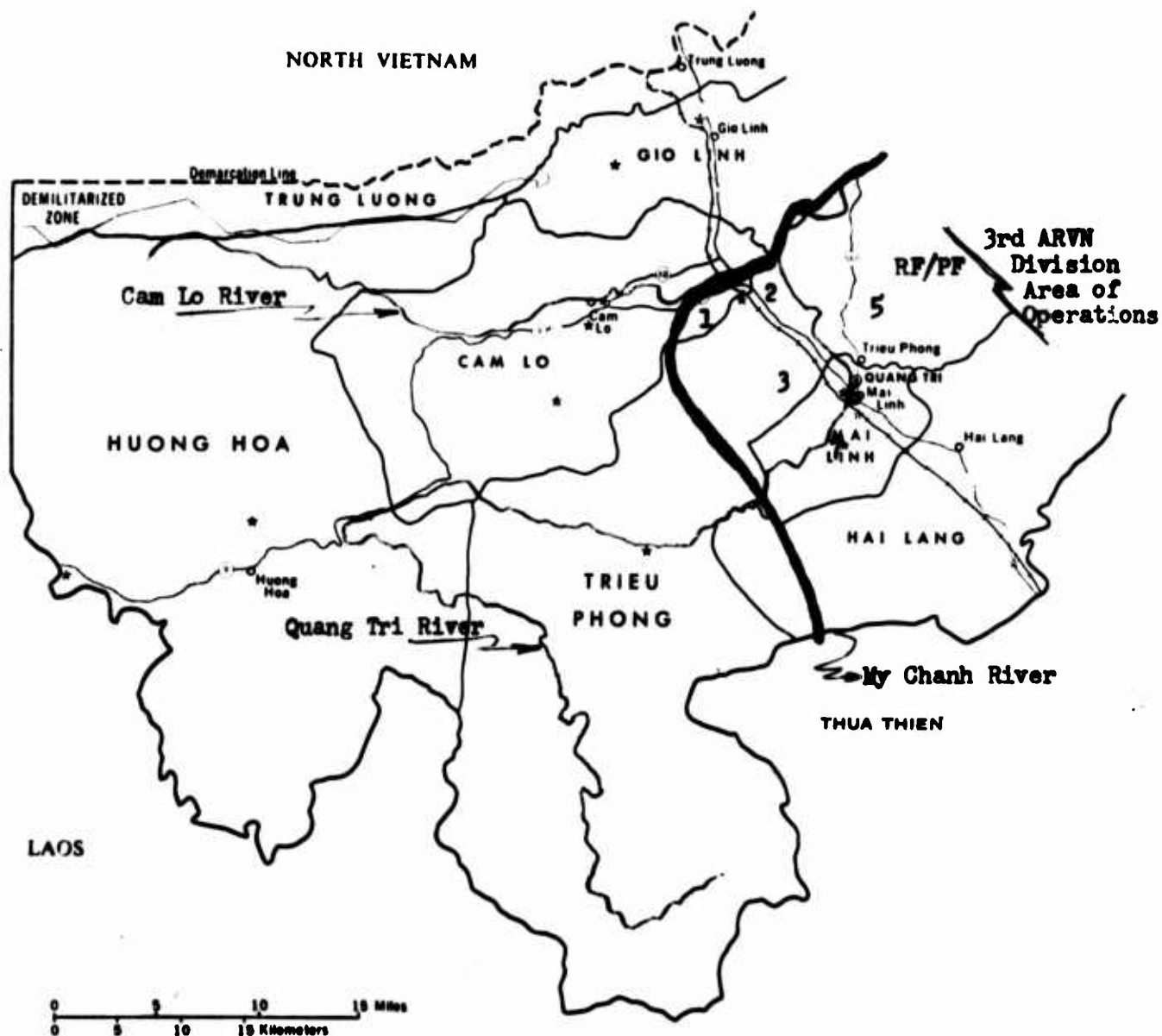
\* On 9 April the 4th Ranger Group arrived (32nd Bn, 43rd Bn, &  
44th Bn)

Enemy activity decreased greatly on the 8th of April. Enemy troops and vehicles were observed moving, but it appeared that the NVA were regrouping. A contact with an estimated enemy battalion was reported by the 21st and 37th Ranger battalions. The NVA directed large-scale attacks against the 1st Arm Bde and the 258th VNM Bde on 9 April. The attack on the 1st Arm Bde began at 0705H, which came from the west, was repulsed by elements of the 20th Tank Sqdn and the 5th Ranger Group. The 6th VNM Bn, reinforced by 2nd Troop, 20th Tank Sqdn, was attacked in the vicinity of FSB Pedro by infantry and tanks at 0630H on 9 April, and by 0810H, enemy tanks had broken through FSB



# MAP "C" QUANG TRI

1. 1st Arm Bde
2. 57th Regiment
3. 258th VNMC Bde
4. 1st Ranger Group
5. 2nd Regiment
6. La Vang Village
7. FSB Sharon



Pedro and pushed friendly troops back toward QTCB about two kilometers. Also on 9 April, enemy artillery fire increased, with La Vang Village and OP Sharon receiving the bulk of the incoming and Quang Tri City receiving incoming for the first time. The enemy conducted three large-scale attacks against 3rd ARVN Division troops on 10 April, which were repulsed and later allowed the 6th VNMN Bn to retake FSB Pedro. The enemy situation on 11 April continued to be that of apparent regrouping and resupplying. Scattered contact and incoming attacks by fire occurred through the AO. There were three fairly large contacts involving the 38th Ranger Bn, the 2nd Regiment, and the 6th VNMN Bn. The 12th and 13th of April were marked with continued light contacts involving all units of the 3rd ARVN Division.

Quang Trung 729 (ARVN Offensive) began on 14 April 72. The division was organized into five task forces.

Task Organization (14 April 72)(See Map D, page 16)

1. 1st Armor Bde (20th Tank Sqdn (-), 17th Cav Sqdn, 4th Rgr Gp, 5th Ranger Group)
  2. 258th VNMN Bde (1st VNMN Bn, 3rd VNMN Bn, 6th VNMN Bn, 11th Cav Sqdn, 2nd Trp, 20th Tank Sqdn)
  3. 2nd Regiment
  4. 57th Regiment
  5. 1st Ranger Group (1st Trp, 4th Cav Sqdn (arrived 14 Apr))
- \* On 18 April, 3rd Trp, 18th Cav Sqdn arrived, attached to the 258th VNMN Bde

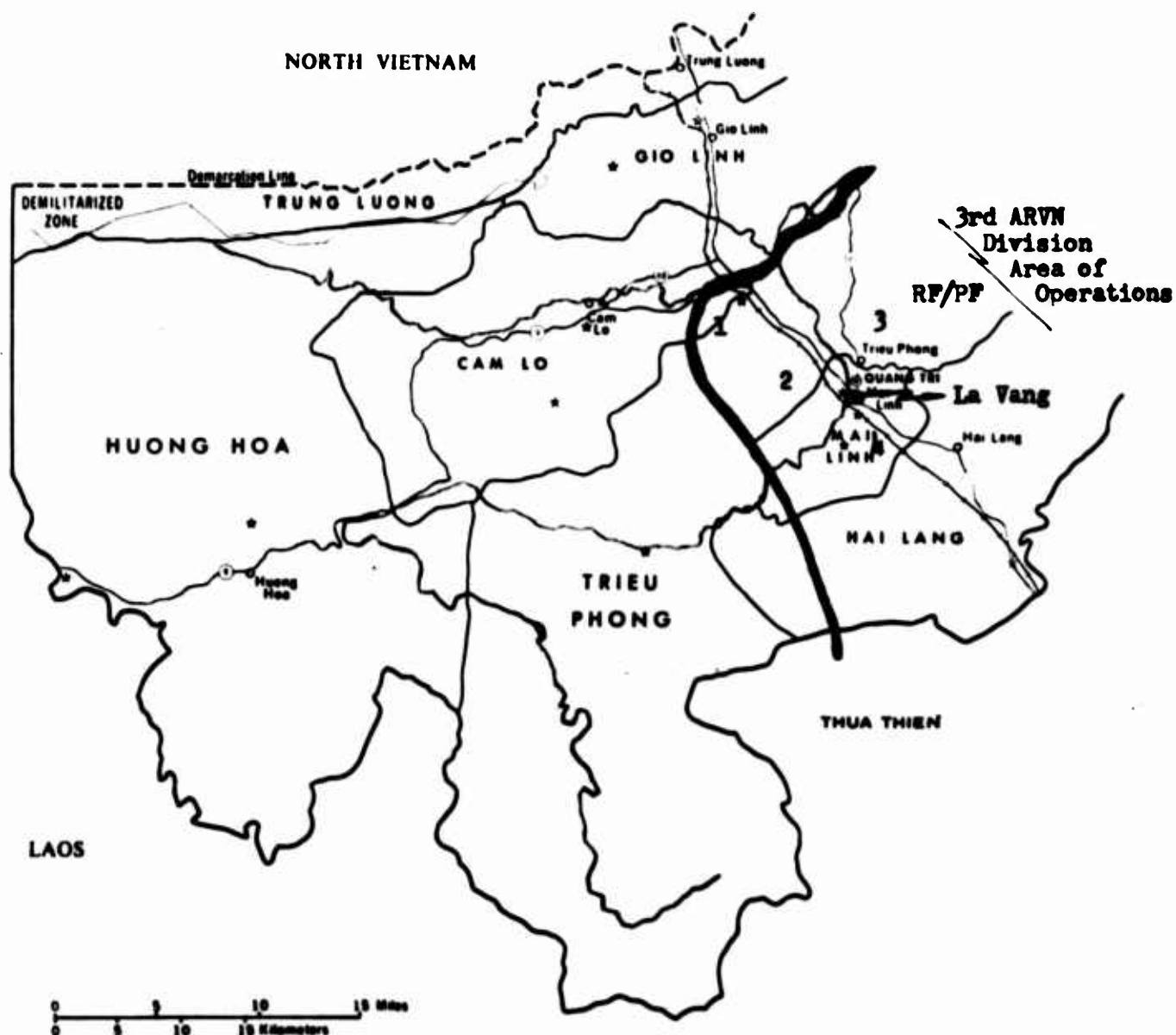
The first day of the offensive was noted by light, scattered contacts as the friendly units advanced very cautiously. The only significant contact involved the 5th Ranger Group. The second day of Quang Trung 729 was marked by scattered contacts all along the



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# MAP "D" QUANG TRI

1. 1st Arm Bde
2. 258th VNM C Bde
3. 2nd Regiment
4. 1st Ranger Group



western front line trace as friendly troops continued the offensive cautiously. Elements of the 20th Tank Sqdn, 6th VNMC Bn and the 1st Ranger Group were involved in major contacts. There was only one significant contact reported on 16 April. On 17 April, three significant contacts occurred. Although this was the fourth day of the offensive, friendly units had not advanced since the first day. A note of interest here is that the 3rd ARVN Division commander, Brig Gen Giai, made numerous proposals to LTG Lam, ARVN I Corps commander, for a pronounced advance of his elements; but, was always told to proceed cautiously and make sure all areas were thoroughly cleared before advancing. Needless to say, an order of that stipulation only resulted in a lot of rear area movement and absolutely no advance toward the enemy to the west of QLL and QTCB. Enemy activity increased on 18 April with all friendly unit positions receiving indirect fire attacks. At 1230H, the 33rd Ranger Bn reported contact. At 1830H an apparent coordinated enemy attack was being launched against the entire western front of the division. The 3rd VNMC Bn observed tanks at 1845H, with contact by enemy ground troops infiltrating their companies. At 1900H, the 6th VNMC Bn reported contact with enemy tanks and infantry. Shortly later, the 1st Armor Bde reported heavy incoming by 130mm guns, and 1915H, the 1st Ranger Group reported tanks west of their position at La Vang. A tactical emergency was declared at 1930H and the US Air Force responded with numerous airstrikes along the entire western perimeter of the 3rd ARVN Division. These strikes were so devastating that it completely broke the back of the enemy attack and the tactical emergency was terminated by 2400H. There were numerous contacts all along the front line trace on 19 April.

The front line trace had not changed by more than 500 meters in any one direction since the offensive had began. On 20 April, all units received a heavy volume of enemy indirect fire, but there were no ground attacks. From 21 Apr through 25 Apr, neither side advanced to any degree allowing TAC Air, Naval gunfire and ARVN artillery to carry the effort of friendly activity. On the morning of 26 April, numerous reports began to come in indicating that the enemy was making a major effort to close QL1 south of Quang Tri City and the 1st Ranger Group was ordered to do all in its power to keep the road open. Meanwhile to the east of Quang Tri City, the Quang Tri Province Regional and Popular Force units were reporting heavy contact with enemy ground troops and enemy amphibious tanks. BG Qia1 directed that the newly reconstituted 2nd Bn of the 56th Regt move from the defense of Quang Tri City and assist the RF and PF forces. On 20 and 21 Apr, all units received a heavy volume of enemy indirect fire, with neither side advancing to any degree. TAC Air, US Naval gunfire and ARVN artillery carried the friendly effort.

Task Organization (22 April 72) (See Map E, page 19)

Task Force 1 (1st Armored Bde)

20th Tank Sqdn (-)

17th Cav Sqdn

4th Ranger Group

5th Ranger Group

3rd Troop, 18th Cav Sqdn

57th Regiment

1st Bn, 2nd Regt (on 26 Apr returned to 2nd Regt control)



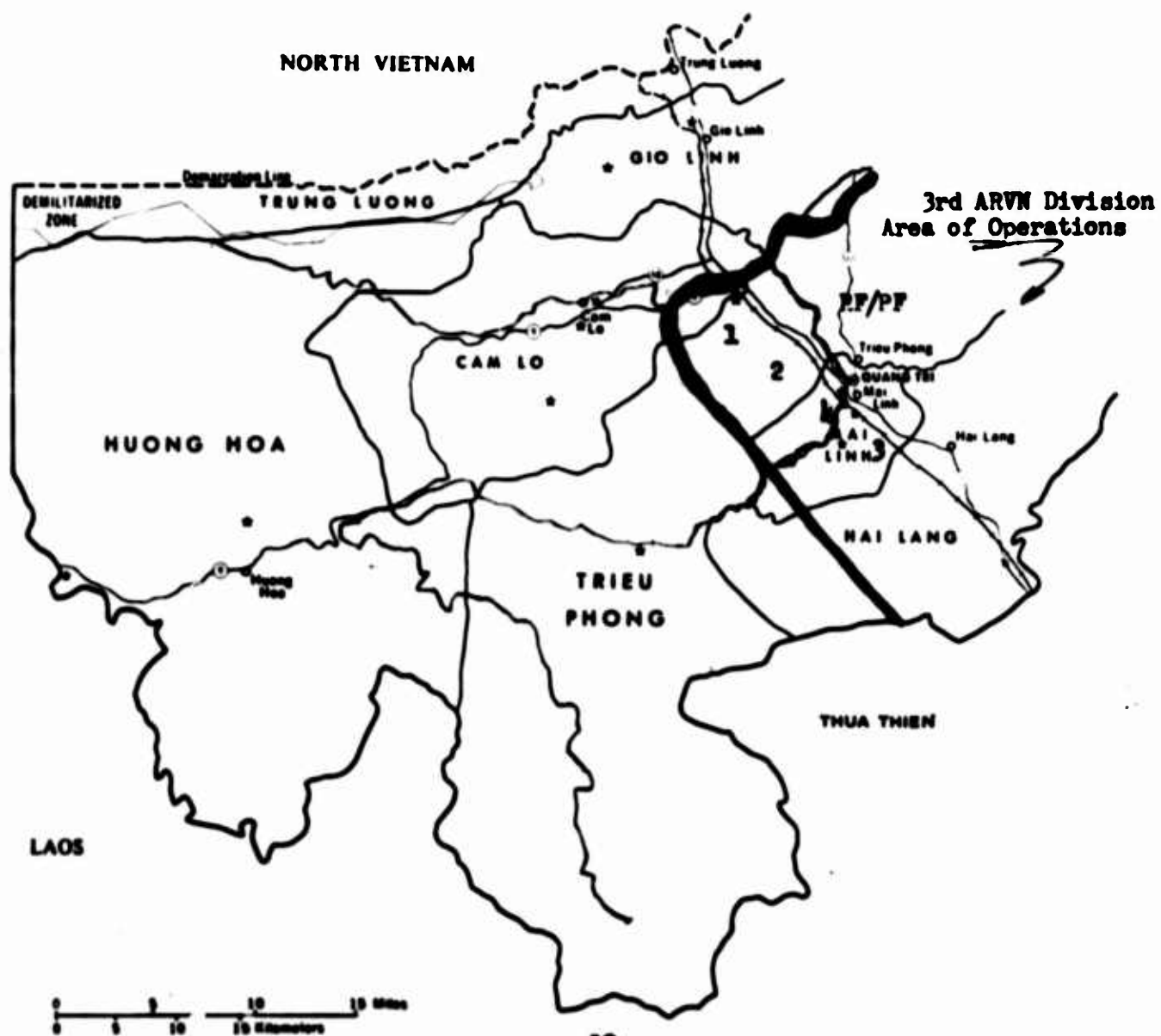


SOUTH VIETNAM

# MAP "E" QUANG TRI

Task Forces:

1  
2  
3  
4



Task Force 2 (258th VNMC Bde)

1st VNMC Bn

3rd VNMC Bn

6th VNMC Bn

2nd Troop, 20th Tank Sqdn

\* On 23 April, 147th VNMC Bde with 4th VNMC Bn and 8th VNMC Bn,  
replaced 258th VNMC Bde with 3rd VNMC Bn and 6th VNMC Bn.

Task Force 3 (1st Ranger Group with 21st Bn, 37th Bn & 77th Rgr  
Bns)

1st Troop, 14th Cav Sqdn

Task Force 4 (2nd Regt with 2nd and 3rd Bns)

11th Cav Sqdn

1st Troop, 20th Tank Sqdn

\* 1st Bn, 2nd Regt (returned 2nd Regt 26 Apr)

\* 18th Cav Sqdn (-) (arrived 27 Apr)

Phase 2 of Quang Trung 729 began on 22 April. Only one significant contact occurred. At 1220H, the 3rd Bn, 2nd Regt along with elements of the 11th Cav Sqdn had a major contact to the west of Quang Tri City. Enemy activity increased substantially on 23 April. Units of the 1st Arm Bde were attacked by infantry supported by 12 tanks. At 1455H on 24 Apr, two companies of the 30th Ranger Bn and the 2nd Troop, 17th Cav Sqdn were in heavy contact. The front line trace of all units remained the same as that of 23 Apr. Only one significant contact occurred on 25 Apr. At 0735H, an element of the 20th Tank Sqdn received five enemy wire-guided missiles with one friendly tank (M48) destroyed. The front line trace again remained the same. The 26th of Apr was marked by many ground contacts and attacks by fire. To the south of Quang Tri City the 1st Ranger

Group was in heavy contact. Sector units (RF/PF) and two elements of the division saw action to the east of Quang Tri City. Enemy pressure persisted throughout the day from the west, south and east.

The morning of the 27th of April signalled the beginning of the enemy push to take all friendly ground held in Quang Tri Province. At 0615H the 32nd Bn, 4th Ranger Group was attacked by enemy infantry. The 1st Bn, 147th VNMC Bde was in contact. At 0645H, the 2nd Bn, 2nd Regt was attacked in its night location. At 0715H, the 3rd Bn, 2nd Regt; 37th Ranger Bn, 1st Ranger Group; and the 8th VNMC Bn were also in contact. At 0600H, 2nd Bn, 56th Regt and the 1st Trp, 11th Cav Sqdn were hit. At 0630H La Vang Village was coming under fire. At 0640H QTCB and the 147th VNMC Bde HQ were under fire. At 0645H 2nd Regt areas were receiving artillery fire. At 0650H the 1st Armor Bde reported that most of its units were under fire. By 0730H all forward elements of the division were under fire. The division commander declared a tactical emergency at 0815H. In the 1st Arm Bde area of operations company sized enemy attacks were being made from 0900H on. Enemy infantry backed by tanks were engaged by all elements throughout the day. At 1145H the 20th Tank Sqdn reported destroying six enemy tanks. At 1245H the 1st Trp, 17th Cav reported knocking out 2 enemy tanks. Most units lost ground but were holding. The 4th Ranger Group broke under heavy enemy pressure by an estimated two enemy battalions and its units began streaming east toward QL1 at about 1615H. It wasn't until 1850H that the 4th Gp commander regained control of his units and got them to turn around and hold. At the end of the day most 1st Arm Bde units were pushed to within two to three kilometers of QL1. Artillery attacks on friendly positions persisted throughout the day with a heavy concentration on

QTCB. At 1930H the ammunition dump on QTCB was hit and burned and exploded on into the night.

The 2nd Regt AO fared badly during the day. By 1015H the 2nd Bn was reportedly in contact with a reinforced enemy battalion and its position overrun at 1200H. At 1230H the 2nd Regt Command Post relocated to the east end of the Quang Tri Bridge. At 1300H the 2nd Bn partially regrouped moved under heavy contact prepared to act as a delaying force to protect the bridge. At 1750H the Regt Command Post was under heavy artillery and mortar fire when the Senior Advisor was wounded seriously by shrapnel. He was rescued and evacuated by US advisors from Quang Tri City and medevac'd at 1840H. From this time on there were no US advisors with this Regt.

To the south the 1st Ranger Group enemy activity was high. At 1000H the 37th Bn made contact with an estimated enemy battalion. By 1100H with most units in heavy contact the 1st Ranger Group was heading east toward QL1 in disarray. With much ground lost the Division settled down to a watchful night. Because of the declared tactical emergency, ARC Lights (B52 strikes) and all available TAC Air were used effectively to stop the enemy.

As the 28th of April began the most critical situation was with the 2nd Regt in protecting the Quang Tri Bridge. Its loss would effectively cut off over half of the division's maneuver elements and jeopardize Quang Tri City. With their status largely unknown they were still tasked by Div to protect the bridge. In the early afternoon the 2nd Troop, 18th Cav Sqdn was sent to reinforce the 2nd Regt at the bridge. The troop commander reported that no infantry were at the bridge and it appeared that the whole 2nd Regt was gone.

An intercepted enemy radio transmission confirmed this fact as the enemy commander reported he was proceeding north along the road to the approaches of the bridge and no defending forces had been met. At 1520H the troop commander reported he was in contact. At 2000H the Cav Troop pulled back to a position west of the bridge and the commander reported he still had no infantry support and had lost 2 M113's.

Units of the 1st Arm Bde were experiencing another bad day. Attacks by fire began in the AO at 0630H. Enemy infantry and tanks were reported attacking from the north and the east. The brigade commander was reported wounded and moved to the rear for treatment. By 1330H the brigade and most of its elements had pulled back to within one kilometer north of QTCB. The US Senior Advisor with the brigade reported that without the commander present, there was no motivation among the officers.

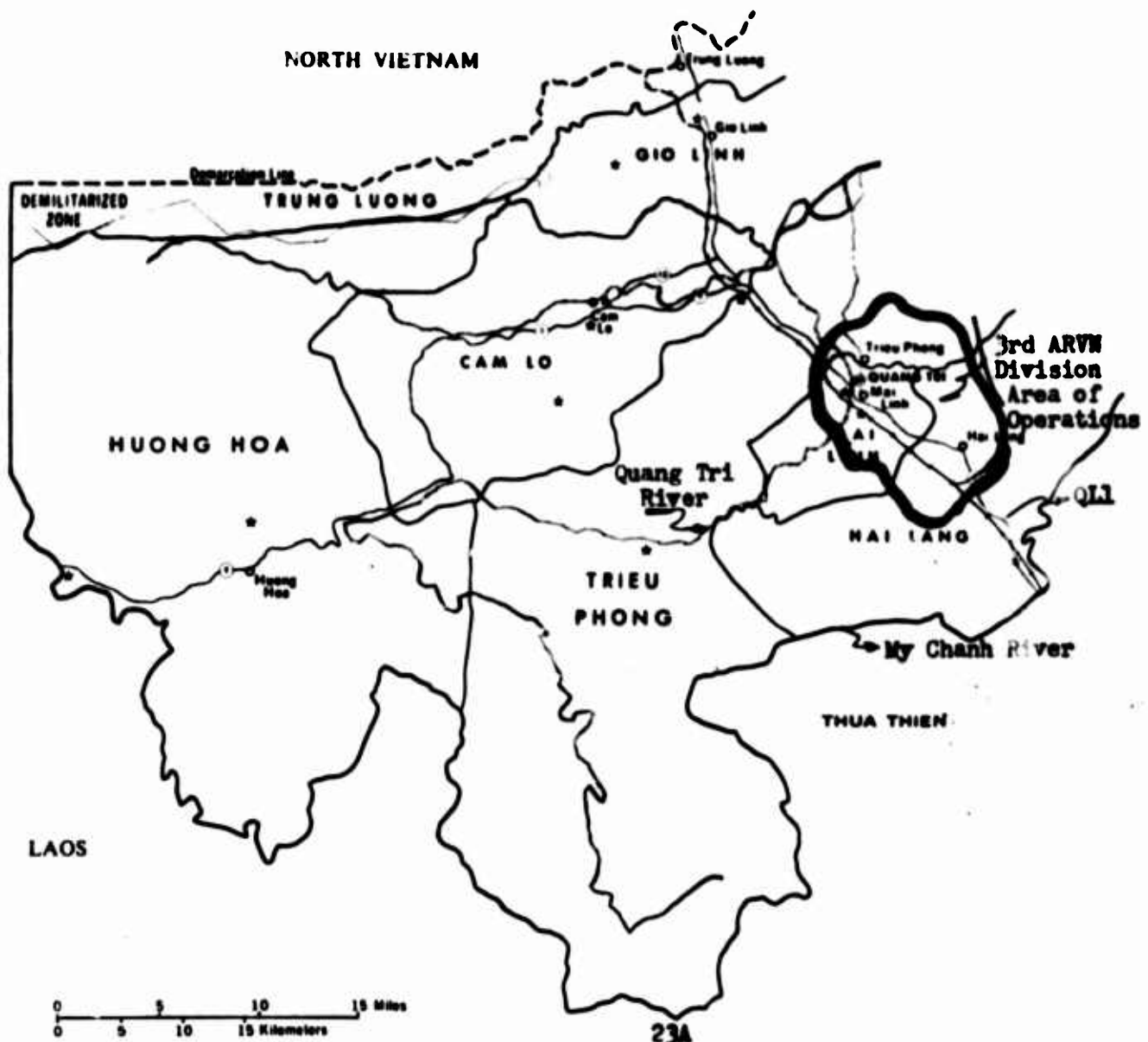
A road block set up by the 147th VNMC Bde on QL1 north of QTCB was stopping the 1st Arm Bde troops trying to go south and backing them up along the highway. At 1610H the road block was broken by the mass of men and vehicles and they continued to stream south.

At 1830H the 57th Regiment was assessed by the US Senior Advisor as being totally ineffective. The commander of the 57th had only his reconnaissance platoon with him and had no knowledge of the status of his two battalions that had been near Dong Ha City. Through the night men continued to infiltrate south without their equipment and vehicles.

The only effective unit east of Quang Tri City and still defending QTCB was the 147th VNMC Bde, and it was under heavy continuous 130mm gun fire. (See Map "F", page 234)



**MAP "F"**  
**QUANG TRI**



At 0600H, 29 April, five enemy tanks with infantry again attempted to take the eastern side of the Quang Tri Bridge. The 2nd Trp, 18th Cav continued to hold despite taking heavy casualties. The 2nd Regt was completely gone from the area even though they had reported night locations west and south of the bridge. By 0630H, elements of the 147th VNBC Bde were heading south from QTCB to counterattack against the enemy units that were trying to take the bridge. By 0930H the area along QL1 from QTCB to the bridge was cleared. The bridge was closed to traffic pending a check by engineer personnel for mines, who quickly determined that either enemy mines or TAC Air bombs had weakened the spans to a point where it could no longer be used for vehicular traffic, and that the old railroad bridge which was about a hundred yards east would have to be utilized. The 147th VNBC Bde continued to hold QTCB under heavy enemy pressure and with the constant threat of loss of the Quang Tri Bridge to the south. The 20th Tank Sqdn which now supported the Arm Bde had an inventory of 19 M48 tanks (out of the original 53) and 12 APC's. The two troops of the 11th Cav Sqdn reported four M41's and six APC's. To the south of Quang Tri City most units were pulled back to locations near QL1 and experienced little or no contact during the day. A large number of ARVN soldiers were reported mixed in with the refugees on QL1.

The 1st Armor Bde had a new commander assigned and he was tasked to try and break out to the south on QL1 and link up with units which were supposedly attempting to break through to the 3rd ARVN Division. Its operation was severely hampered by civilian and military traffic congesting the road. To add to the already present confusion, friendly tanks were heading south on their own under the

guise their vehicles required maintenance. Who was to question? 1st Arm Bde elements were attempting to stop them. Lack of coordination between commands and the sight of armor leaving the area caused fear and panic among the units along QL1. The 57th Regt could account for only one battalion of 300 men at this time. The 17th Cav Sqdn had only 14 M41's and 21 other vehicles. Status of the 14th and 5th Ranger Groups was uncertain.

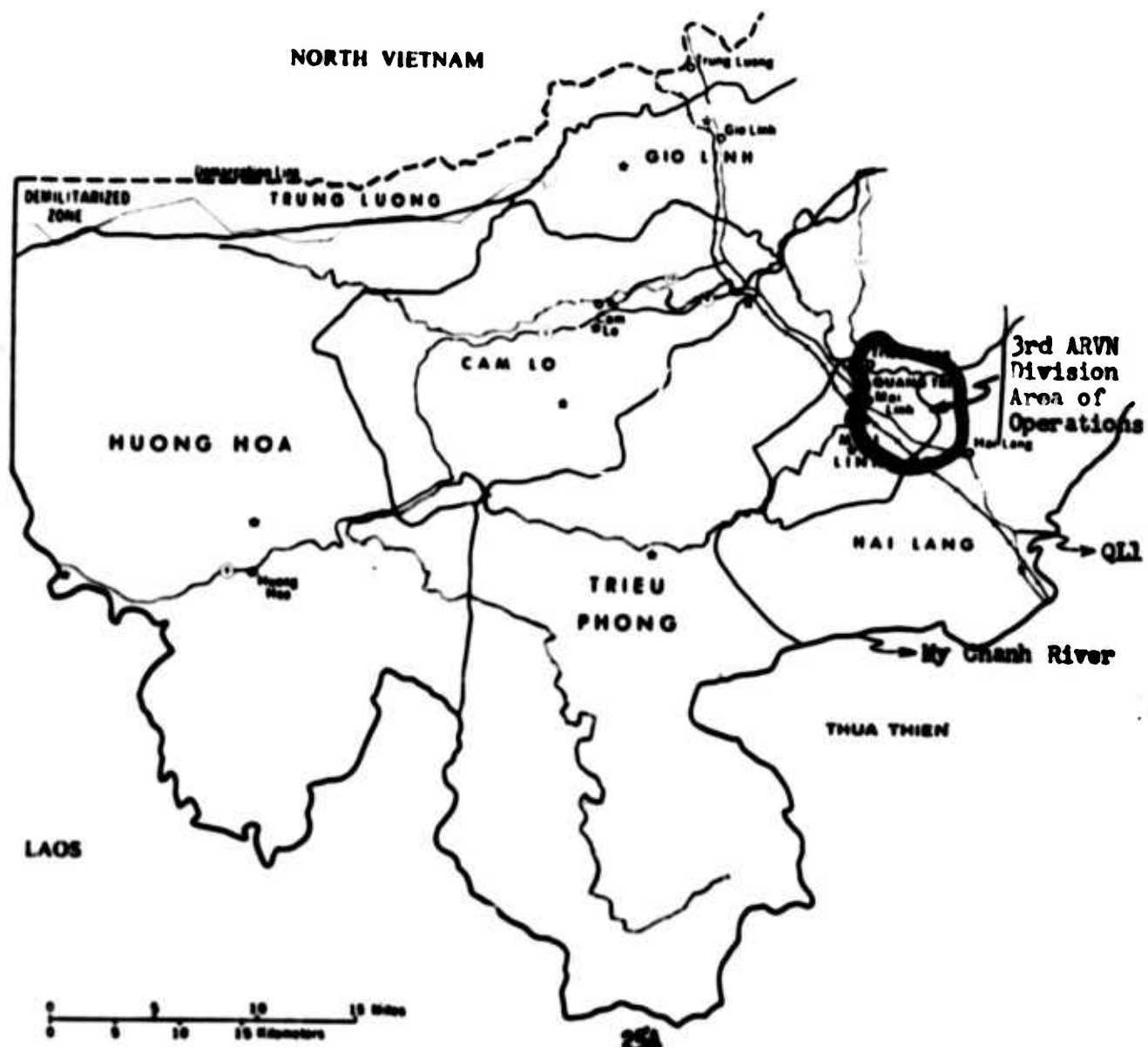
At 0445H, 30 Apr, QTCB and Quang Tri City began taking incoming. At 0510H the 1st Bn, 147th VNMC Bde spotted enemy infantry and engaged them with artillery. At 0530H heavy tank movement was reported to the south of QTCB. By mid-day the 147th VNMC Bde with supporting armor elements were the only friendly troops west of Quang Tri City. In the afternoon they were ordered to cross the bridge to the east due to their tenuous situation. By early evening all elements except two companies were across when ARVN engineers blew the railroad bridge. The remaining elements forded the river and rejoined their units by 1900H. The 147th VNMC Brigade took up defensive positions on the eastern bank of the river for the night. At 2300H enemy infantry and tanks were sighted at the west end of the bridges and were engaged by TAC Air. (See Map "O", page 25A)

At 0650H, 30 Apr, the 1st Arm Bde was again given the mission of moving to the south along QL1 and seize the bridge across the My Chanh River. Units of the 1st Arm Bde in their attempt to clear QL1 and move to the south were under constant fire from the east. If you can imagine several thousand troops and hundreds of vehicles all bunched up on QL1 with no route of escape except into the withering fire of the enemy you can imagine the panic that kept this part of the AO in a constant state of flux.





**MAP "Q"**  
**QUANG TRI**



Every time General Giai would attempt to clarify the picture to a point of being able to make a little order of the chaos, he would receive additional information that continued to compound the hopelessness of the situation. As I'll remark in the conclusion to this paper, it was at this stage of the action that the higher headquarters of each attached unit would radio into their subordinate units contrary instructions to the point that it became most difficult to ascertain just exactly where the units were and even more difficult to determine was the ability of the commanders still around to command. It soon became apparent to Brig Gen Giai at this time that if any attempt was to be made to defend the city of Quang Tri that he had better bring the 117th VNMC Bde into the city and charge them with the defense. Just to give you an idea as to the seriousness of the situation, the new commander of the 1st Arm Bde around 1800H, 30 Apr, decided that inasmuch as he didn't have any more 105mm howitzer ammunition on hand that he would order the destruction of the 33rd FA Bn's 18 105's, and while he was at it he ordered the 17th Cav Sqdn to destroy their remaining M41 tanks. Needless to say, that by the time BG Giai heard of this order it was too late to countermand. I'm sure that if BG Giai had been in the presence of that ARVN officer, there would be one less on their register.

At this stage of the action, the deteriorating tactical situation and the alarming rate of unit desertions prompted preparation planning for routes of withdrawal. Disorganized units of infantry, mechanized infantry, and artillery were still streaming south on the highway. At mid-day the word came in that the enemy was attacking the fleeing column in many places along QL1 from the east and the south. The result of this action seemed to stop the exodus of men and vehicles

to the south and in turn forced them back up QL1 to the north. Imagine the enemy's enviable position of being able to fire anywhere on QL1 and be able to hit someone or something. Devastating!

As the day ended the 3rd ARVN Division was in a very precarious position. All ground west of the Quang Tri River was in the hands of the enemy. The west bank of the river was holding supported by US Naval gunfire and TAC Air. To the south there was disorganization and chaos with units trying to flee south and the enemy preventing them. Areas to the east of Quang Tri City were protected throughout the day from enemy amphibious armor and infantry by air power and naval gunfire.

The morning of 1 May saw the Division HQ intact but with division staff members leaving or preparing to leave. The city was still being held by the 147th VNBC Bde to the west and the 4th and 5th Ranger Qps to the south. The US Advisory Team continued to coordinate the use of TAC Air and US Naval gunfire on enemy positions in defense of the city. ARVN counterparts were at this point ineffective and those who had not left already seemed totally unaware or unconcerned of the situation. Most activity was concerned with packing belongings on vehicles.

At 0715H QTCB was hit by numerous ARC Light strikes. By 1200H the division commander declared the situation hopeless. The city could not be held under the circumstances, despite advisor protestations that with the 147th VNBC Bde within the walls of the Quang Tri City Citadel we could hold indefinitely with all the TAC Air and US Naval gunfire available. The crowning blow came when the 147th VNBC Bde commander when approached with the possibility of defending the Citadel declared that his troops would not stay and defend when

everyone else was leaving.

By 1400H all but the Division Command Group had departed the bunker complex in the Citadel of Quang Tri City. Bankers and positions along the wall had been abandoned leaving weapons and ammunition in place. It was at this point in time that I activated plans for the advisory team and all US personnel to be extracted by air. Originally Brig Gen Giai and his personal staff had decided to stay and be extracted with the advisory element; but, after conference with his men the decision was made for them to try and break out in APC's and make their way south. They were gone less than 15 minutes before they came back after having been fired upon and ambushed at the southern exits from Quang Tri City.

Under heavy friendly air cover, rescue helicopters began the extraction at 1635H, and by 1655H, Quang Tri City belonged to the enemy.

In the resume of combat action just concluded, I have purposefully avoided addressing the results of each encounter. Though I felt those results were relative when it came to measuring combat effectiveness, I did not feel it pertinent when the objective was designed to acquaint the reader with the facts concerning problems of command and control, basic leadership and the attitude of the individual ARVN soldier. Let it suffice to say that after 30 days of continuous combat the 3rd ARVN Division ran out of steam and was no longer able to organize an effectiveness. Couple this with the fact that most of the attached units were at cross-purposes as to what their mission assignments were as assigned by the 3rd ARVN Division commander and relating those orders to the steady stream of instructions that attached unit commander's received from their own parent headquarters.

Too often this attached parent unit headquarters command, located far to the south and out of the combat zone was not fully aware of the total situation and predicated their instructions by stipulating cautiousness and preventing involvement from decimating subordinate unit effectiveness.

### CONCLUSION

#### Command and Control.

The command and control element of the 3rd ARVN Division during the period of this action was required at one time or another to task and direct the mission of 36 comparable size combat battalions of infantry (to include RF), armor, cavalry and artillery. It was never equipped or properly trained to cope with the command and control problems incumbent.

United States Army Field Manual 61-100, entitled "The Division" states:

Command is the authority that a commander exercises over his subordinates by virtue of rank and assignment. It includes the responsibility for effectively using available resources and for planning the employment of, organizing, directing, coordinating, and controlling military forces to accomplish assigned missions.

The mission and scope of division operations prevent the commander from personally accomplishing or supervising all tasks in the time and manner required. He reduces demands on his time and energy by directing operations through an efficient chain of command and by effectively using his staff.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, an operational control attachment does not carry with it the allegiance and loyalty necessary for the conduct of combat operations in South Vietnamese Army operations one ex-

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<sup>1</sup>FM 61-100, Department of the Army Field Manual, THE DIVISION, Headquarters, Department of the Army, November 1968, page 7-1.

pects and understands from United States Army employment doctrine.

Numerous incidents known by the 3rd ARVN Division commander indicated his orders were not being implemented through countermand orders of the attached units immediate parent higher headquarters or as a direct result of the unit commander's failure to comply. It became apparent to the advisory elements that the 3rd ARVN Division commander was being held accountable for actions that too often he had very little control or ability to influence. Despite hourly contact with the ARVN Corps commander apprising of events, very little was done by a higher headquarters to consolidate and orient the effort.

Hindsight buys very little rationalizing mission failure; but, it does help to point out the fact that once division assigned subordinate elements are not capable of conducting further operations it doesn't help to keep assigning a flow of attached units, of dubious motivation when away from their parent units, to plug the gap. After three weeks of constant fighting by the regularly assigned tactical units of the 3rd ARVN Division they were no longer effective and only added to the confusion by trying to accept combat assignments and then realizing that their strength and lack of leadership served only to dismay whatever success may have been expected from newly arrived units. A point of interest relative to supply was the fact that the 3rd ARVN Division never did activate its logistical battalion and had to rely on separate supply and maintenance companies which were always under control of I Corps (ARVN). Couple this fact with the influx of attached units and then let your imagination roll around with the ramifications of this problem.

It takes a very special breed of soldier with outstanding leadership to stand on the line when all around he sees the evacuation and abandonment of other units. Someone has to stand and fight if successive lines are to be established. One must understand the full scope of combat tactics to comprehend the problems of retrograde movement especially its implementation when faced with an absolute lack of subordinate unit tactical knowledge of disengagement parameters, other than the rout. What training had these units ever received to prepare them mentally and physically for the whole score of conventional warfare along with its unlimited and very accurate artillery attacks and the roar of racing enemy armor; when, most units of the 3rd ARVN Division had been out on firebases for years, or had just been activated from a Quang Tri and Thua Thien Province disposal of Regional, Popular and Peoples Self-Defense Forces. I'm not saying that the division could have done any better a year from now; but, just to state the fact that ARVN wasn't trained tactically or psychologically for an event of this nature. NO ARVN DIVISION WOULD HAVE DONE ANY BETTER!

Brig Gen Giai was the first to admit that he was losing control and sought desperately from his higher headquarters a solution. The ARVN I Corps commander's comment usually implied to BG Giai that his recourse was to shoot the insubordinate commander 'on the spot', irregardless of the attachment. Visualize the outgrowth of this happening!

Maintaining the proper degree of command and control always has been a major concern of the military leader. The problem is with us now more than ever. One commander today decries weakness of command and control as cause for alarm. The results of "under-command" of-

ten have been disastrous. Another commander laments "over-control" necessitated by our modern era of advanced technology and weaponry. The results of reins too tightly held have been equally catastrophic. Both are correct. A proper balance of command and control is required for the success of any operation -- the commander's will must be carried out in spirit and in fact. The method of execution must be the subordinate's full responsibility. This is simple to state but often difficult to accomplish for it must be remembered that command and control requires tempering the analysis of commander effectiveness and knowing when the 'span of control' is out of focus. History bears us out!

Span of control is a ubiquitous problem. All individuals -- leaders or followers -- often meet situations in which the volume and character of the information which makes up a particular situation tax the capacity to deal effectively with the situation -- tax the ability to control it. The factors which underlie and determine this ability are still largely a matter of speculation, but it is thought that they can be defined and measured.<sup>2</sup>

I don't proposed going into the history of the measurement of the concept, because control -- or span of control -- is desultory. Let the comment suffice that Brig Gen Gial obviously had the problem and the assistance of his staff and the leadership of his subordinate commanders only served to let the problem get so far out of hand that he was unable to cope with it which in turn invited collapse. Professionalism in depth is an absolute must for an operation of this magnitude.

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<sup>2</sup>US Army Armor Human Research Unit, Fort Knox, Kentucky,  
SPANOCON: Span of Control Research Memorandum, May 1962.



### Leadership.

A senior American general said recently: "When troops perform badly it's because of poor leadership. Soldiers are the same in everybody's army. What makes one better than another is the quality of the leadership". Another well-informed American put the problem this way: "The South Vietnamese are up against a 20th Century army, where the troops are tightly disciplined, the leaders highly trained and promoted on merit. These guys in the South are products of a system to traditional mandarism and French colonialism that just cannot hang together against it." <sup>3</sup>

American administration officials believe that Vietnam's future now hangs more on the performance of the leadership of the South Vietnamese army than on U. S. military support. Administration analysts attribute the weakness of South Vietnamese officers to an assortment of factors ranging from Asian traditions and the legacy of French colonialism to the influence of American military muscle in Vietnam since 1965.<sup>4</sup> A chronic shortcoming in the South Vietnamese officer corps has been its promotion and assignment system, which largely has been based on political loyalties, regional affinities and family ties rather than competence.

I only want to touch on this subject lightly for it was a known fact that too many of the leaders in the 3rd ARVN Division were pro-

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<sup>3</sup>Whitney, Craig R. "Failure of Leadership", New York Times, May 3, 1972, page 20.

<sup>4</sup>Karnow, Stanley, "Test for Saigon's Officers", Washington Post, May 7, 1972.

ducts of an assignment system that left any measurement of their combat ability lacking. And when the chips were down and the commander's presence necessary for leadership came into view; they were lacking. It's disconcerting as hell when you go down to a Regimental Command Post to visit the commander and you are told that he left to take his family and personal belongings south to a place of safety. Would this circumstance impact upon the American officer corps? What is good for the leader then necessarily conveys with it the connotation that the individual soldier can do likewise. Compound this situation with every member of the division who had his dependents within range of enemy artillery and visualize the additional problems of command. Too often Brig Gen Giai would merely shrug his shoulders and say that his men would return to the line when their families were safe; or, that he couldn't relieve certain leaders because he had no one else to replace them. When questioned as to the feasibility of setting up some rather stringent straggler lines, Brig Gen Giai commented to the effect that he had no units he could effectively trust with the responsibility. True!

#### Individual ARVN Soldier.

In accordance with his Confucian heritage, a Vietnamese soldier identifies himself almost exclusively as a member of a particular family rather than of a community, occupation group or other informal association. For most Vietnamese in the mid-1960's, choices of action and attitude in general were determined by expediency rather than by moral dictates. In the climate of insecurity brought on by two decades of war and political instability, actual behavior tended to depart to some extent from the ideal behavior advocated

by Confusianism, which stresses loyalty, generosity and sacrifice among a wide circle of kinsmen and close friends. The matter of survival was an immediate, overriding concern, and the welfare of those persons to whom one had the closest, most intimate ties took priority over all other considerations.<sup>5</sup>

I think it important to understand the above quote for it permeates the entire South Vietnamese system for accomplishment and if the task doesn't immediately relate, then it becomes subordinate. And when it manifests itself throughout the heirarchy of the South Vietnamese Army then one can place a little better handle on what motivates the individual soldier to place his family first and the military mission somewhere down the ladder. I wouldn't dare venture a true relation of this family concern as it would impact upon the efficiency of the 3rd ARVN Division throughout this action period except to say without reservation that the accumulation of daily missing strength figures did more to destroy the will and effectiveness of its units than did the fire of the enemy. Attached units whose individual soldier's families were safe to the south thus were not subject to this mental strain and did fare better. The only thing is that the view of 3rd ARVN Division soldiers leaving with their families didn't contribute an attitude necessary to withstand the enemy's constant onslaught on the part of the newly arrived units.

Why was the NVA so perseverant? What did they have to gain? I would like to quote a statement by Bernard B. Fall:

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<sup>5</sup>Department of the Army Pamphlet Number 550-55, Area Handbook for South Vietnam, April 1967, page 192.

How did the North Vietnamese leaders achieve such a fanatical nationalism utilizing people of the same ethnic background as those in the south where a similar nationalism was not achieved? Some authorities say the cohesive ideology of communism, coupled with the ruthless elimination of all groups which could offer opposition, accounts for the Communist success.<sup>6</sup>

I don't advocate the North Vietnamese approach for nationalism, nor do I feel the current feeling in South Vietnam for democracy is the solution for Vietnamese people; but surely, somewhere in the middle there is a definition of national loyalties and what it means to the people to adhere to them. Is it too late for the South Vietnamese leaders to articulate the sentiments of their people and to forge a cohesive nationalism which will unite their country against communism and produce a viable government? Let's face it, the time for major, American sponsored reforms is past. The logic of Vietnamization will reduce the flexibility of our relations with the Saigon government. To secure its performance in fighting Communism, the United States will have to accept the kind of regime created by the incumbents. Vietnamization involves therefore not only transfer of military responsibilities but abstention from future interference in the composition of the cabinet and the administration of the country. The United States cannot expect to obtain, while disengaging, what it failed to secure at the peak of its efforts on behalf of South Vietnam.

Quite frankly, I think the South Vietnamese people have been subjected to Americanism in its roughest form and for so long that they will never be satisfied with any standard of living that will offer a lesser exposure, and therein may lie their eventual salvation. Shades of South Korea!

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<sup>6</sup> Fall, Bernard B. The Two Vietnams. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1963, page 154.

On 21 July 1972, Lieutenant General William J. McCaffrey, Deputy Commanding General, USARV, visited MACV Advisory Team 155 and received a formal briefing. Following this, General McCaffrey turned to the members of Team 155 and stated that he had a few words to say concerning the 3rd ARVN Division and its performance in Quang Tri Province during the current offensive.

The following is the summarized statement of General McCaffrey:

"I honestly think that the 3rd ARVN Division conducted itself creditably during its 28-day battle at Quang Tri and history will eventually record this fact. The Division was able to lay low two NVA Divisions -- the 304th and the 308th. The fact that these enemy divisions were reduced to about 30% to 40% strength is attributable to the 3rd ARVN Division. Twenty-eight days of steady combat is a long time and many of the problems that arose as a result are, I think, a result of errors at higher levels and are not the result of failures on the part of the poor little bastards fighting on the ground. This Division was not really as bad as the press would have you believe.

"As for the advisors, I think Colonel Metcalf showed a great sense of timing in executing the extraction when he did. I think if the extraction had taken place one half-hour later you'd all be prisoners. The situation you were in was not pleasant, and I wouldn't wish anyone to have to repeat it. But I've been in several of these affairs myself in Korea and earlier in Italy and I think I can say that once you've been through one of them and you wake up the next morning there isn't much that can shake you in the future. If I had my way, I would present everyone who was there with a DSC for the manner in which you did your jobs. Two other ARVN Divisions folded during the offensive, one in twelve hours and the other in one day, and your Division held Quang Tri for 28 days which was actually a great feat of arms. Most people do not know that the 3rd ARVN Division did accomplish a great deal and that your team did an outstanding job of advising them."

  
DONALD J. METCALF  
Colonel Infantry

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<sup>7</sup>McCaffrey, William J., LTG, Summary of Remarks presented to members of MACV Advisory Team 155 after formal briefings on 21 July 1972.

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